

JoAnn McGuckin: Trapped in God's Country

Analysis & Commentary by J.J. Johnson 06.13.01

Sunday, June 10, 2001: Spirt Lake, Idaho

Here's what the issue has been: A woman whose children had held off authorities for five days was destined for a child custody hearing - a story that has been covered in detail on SierraTimes.com.

My mission: To do what the other media wouldn't do – push to see and talk to JoAnn myself. I was in for quite a surprise on many counts. Yes, there was a bigger news story here, and we were all missing it.

But in order for me to explain, I have to tell the whole tale, and, in the process, uncover the real issue of this saga.

As the plane touched down in Spokane, my mind raced, realizing suddenly that there would be few, if any, blacks residing in the place I was visiting to cover this story. My destination: Just a bicycle ride away from Ruby Ridge... and from a former Aryan Nations complex.

I was going to "God's country" - Northern Idaho. A place that everyone who watches CNN, NBC and CBS "knows" hates people who look like me.

The first person who greeted me was a white-haired man named Errol Owen, who immediately drove me to the headquarters of the Idaho Observer.

"Sir, welcome to Idaho."

As a black man who's traveled to 45 of the 50 states, I've learned to be careful when, for some reason, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. But that didn't happen here. Instead, over and over again, I heard "Welcome to Idaho!" spoken with genuine warmth and friendliness from practically everyone I met. And they meant it.

I found myself thinking wryly that there have been times I haven't had such a warm welcome from the folks at home when I visited for Thanksgiving dinner.

There was a strategy session at Pizza Hut on the evening of June 10, 2001, to cover any last minute preparations for the "RALLY for the FAMILY" – first called for on the FreeRepublic.com web site. Ironically, it seemed that the only organization to actually make preparations for the rally was the Sandpoint Idaho Police Department. Police Chief Mark Lockwood took the liberty of stopping by before the crowd of approximately fifteen got there to leave copies of the Sandpoint city ordinance about protesting. Noting how there had been no permit obtained within 45 days prior to the rally (ref: Section 6.6.2), he mentioned that he planned on enforcing this ordinance, and left his calling card – in case anyone had any questions.

Nobody did. This is a place where they can smell a First Amendment violation a mile away. There wasn't even a vote. The consensus was: "We don't need no stinking permits."

This is God's Country. This is Idaho.

I listened to several people explaining to me how they didn't like the image Idaho (especially in the north) has received because of certain incidents: Ruby Ridge and Randy Weaver. Richard Butler and the Aryan Nation.

And now the McGuckin Family. At Pizza Hut, some employees who overheard us discussing the McGuckin case, rather than chasing our small meeting from the building, walked over and said "Thank you for the stand you are taking for JoAnn. We're glad you're here."

Returning late that night to the Idaho Observer's "compound" - apparently the mainstream media's stock term for ordinary homes in Northern Idaho - the real brainstorming began. Don Harkins, his partner, Ingri, and I were in what looked like an Idaho version of the Sierra Times HQ and various other modern-day "committees of correspondence" stations I've been blessed to visit across the country. Dial-up connections not working, systems crashing, deadlines to meet, too much e-mail, frustration, major lack of sleep, all while trying to follow some story that the major media is trying to propagandize and spin.

My goal as a news reporter was to: 1) Cover the news story - not *be* the news story, and 2) walk into downtown Sandpoint with a First Amendment "crowbar", i.e., some pointed questions that would either make someone drag JoAnn in front of the media to say something (anything), or else cause thousands of questions to hit Northern Idaho from all over the country.

To the best of our knowledge, while she's been in jail, JoAnn McGuckin has had no known contact with the outside world except for court-appointed attorney visits. Verification: no phone calls, no family visitors, nothing. Then there was a visit from a quality litigator for over 2 hours, and then an apparent agreement was reached. And finally, there was that famous original press release from Edgar J Steele, Attorney at Law.

What had followed (as I checked my press notes) had been a systematic media attack on Edgar Steele - one that had already started with JoAnn McGuckin. Another check of my press notes showed that the volume of the media onslaught had ratcheted up sharply as soon as JoAnn, in her first public statement, had dared mention something called the Constitution.

In God's Country, the word "Constitution" isn't the dirty word it is in some other places in America. However that word is a hot button for mass media columnists, inciting them to unleash torrents of buzzwords like "anti-government," "extremist," and "white supremacist."

"Well, after all -this is Idaho" I overheard one East Coast reporter say meaningfully while we were waiting for the results of the closed child custody hearing.

Heck - if anyone should have been nervous about "white supremacists" it would have been me. What I found instead was uniform friendliness from every local I met.

For example, the day before, while I was outside the Pizza Hut, a man I've never met, (and will probably never meet again) asked me for directions. I didn't know - I wasn't from around here. I'm from Nevada.

"Oh, well, welcome to Idaho, bud!" He went on, for no reason, to tell me how nice it was that I was there, saying, "That stuff you hear about us? We're not like that here. We don't want that image." And yes, he knew about the JoAnn McGuckin case. According to him, everyone did. It's a small town, after all.

It was something that had bothered me since I'd arrived. Why did he tell me that? And did his walking up to me out of the blue have anything to do with JoAnn McGuckin?

Sadly, yes.

It was later that night during the brainstorming that it hit me. Everyone following the McGuckin story around the country knew something was wrong. Pointing fingers was easy. There's a lot of that going around. Putting a finger *on it* was another matter. It was an e-mail that came in once I got up and running...

"SUBJECT: Regarding Steele...

"...Guys, it's quite possible JoAnn is snubbing Steele due to his other recent high-profile client, the Aryan Nations. That's how Powell could have turned her so deeply against Steele. It's a well-known thing in those parts, do any web-search for the words "Aryan" and "Steele" together...."

The e-mail went on. From the hundreds of messages coming in, this one really grabbed my attention. The second bell went off in my head after I got another forwarded e-mail a few days back:

"...Thanks to an alert liberty activist reader (Name deleted) for pointing out that Edgar Steele has Nazi ties. I apologize, All I'd done is look at the plainlawtalk.com site, which looks innocuous. The name didn't ring a bell to me AT ALL, though I now recall the case mentioned below..."

It was the first of two warnings regarding Steele - the Attorney on the Case. To this one from our friends up north, I did respond:

REPONSE FROM J.J. Johnson:

"Thanks for the heads up, - read them both.

"I didn't see anything saying that Steele AGREED with these folks. In fact, it looks like he was/is at odds with them, just as Jerry Spence didn't necessarily agree with the views of Randy Weaver. It is interesting, however, that Steele decided to conduct his first exclusive interview, with a black guy at Sierra Times.

"Also, if we're going to paint a lawyer for defending a client, then the message we are sending is that if a person's views are abhorrent to us, that person doesn't deserve a legal defense, as guaranteed by our Constitution.

"Is that the path we want to take?

"This reminds me of a Klu Klux Klan case where someone demanded the membership lists of this organization. The Klan decided to hire the best person qualified for this legal defense – who just happened to be a Black man who had

close ties to the NAACP. The NAACP was, of course, furious and made attempts to have the attorney removed from their organization. His response was "Even if I don't agree with them, every American has the right to a legal defense."

"Hope that helps....

J.J. Johnson"

Now, this is not a "hit piece" in any manner against Edgar J. Steele. Steele is an attorney in good standing in at least three states, including Idaho, and a man I now consider to be a friend. But like JoAnn McGuckin, Steele is trapped in God's Country – a place where a negative image had been formed and fossilized by relentless media propaganda – an image that I quickly learned frustrates Idahoans beyond belief (and for good reason) if and when these issues are brought up, because people are not like that here, but they can't seem to change this negative, mainstream-media-driven image.

In my most humble manner, I brought up this issue at the Idaho Observer HQ: "Guys, could Steele's past ALLEGED ties be part of the problem here?"

Don and Ingri didn't even realize it, but they responded like typical folks up in God's Country. I could see the frustration in their faces as they tried to explain the history of Steele legal defense of Richard Butler et al.

Being that I'm married to a lawyer, they were preaching to the choir. But I do remember saying: "Guys! Think past Northern Idaho. What do people in, say....Missouri think?"

It bothered me as I went to sleep, only a few hours before something HAD to break downtown. This place IS God's country. These people are wonderful and friendly – all of them – even to me, a black man from out of state.

"It's almost like they've all been – victimized," I found myself thinking.

Part 2: Monday, June 11, 2001 – Bonner County Courthouse

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